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*Christian:
An Evangelical & Catholic Definition*



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*I*n the early 1990s, I was serving as the Presbyterian campus minister at Georgia Southern University, about an hour inland from Savannah. One of my best friends on campus, Bernie, was an art professor who served as the faculty advisor for Hillel, the Jewish student organization. One day Bernie received a phone call from a young staff member in the student affairs office with a simple request: "Professor, we would like you and your students to lead in the lighting of the University Christmas tree."

Bernie politely declined, explaining that he was the adult leader of the Jewish student organization, and suggested that she should contact one of the Christian student ministries.

"But," the woman objected, "I understand that this year you are chairing our Coordinated Religious Ministries, and we'd really like for your group to lead us in this important tradition."

Again, Bernie explained, "But we're Jewish, so we'll need to decline."

The woman's insistence grew stronger, so Bernie tried again to explain: "You see, Christmas trees are a Christian tradition, and we're not Christians."

"Well," the woman said with considerable frustration, "no one's trying to say you're not a nice person!"

That was it! Bernie, who had grown up Orthodox in Chicago and had his fill of such foolishness down through the years, erupted. "I'm not trying to say I'm not a nice person either. I'm trying to say I'm not a Christian!"

Within a few minutes, still steaming, Bernie had called me, and before long we were both laughing.

Flannery O'Connor famously quipped that the South is not so much Christ-centered as it is Christ-haunted. And there, in the traditional South—the "Bible belt"—a young university staff person had given her definition of Christian: a Christian, in her mind, is defined as "a nice person."

For two millennia, ever since Saints Paul and Barnabas taught in the city of Antioch—where the disciples were first called by this label (Acts 11:26)—followers of Jesus have been called Christians. Yet, at least in the circles in which I run, there are often maddening, if often unrecognized, distinctions in how the term is used. I'd like to examine two of these (leaving "nice person" to the side) and see if we can articulate a more fully developed definition of Christian.

THE "EVANGELICAL" DEFINITION

In more evangelical circles, one is apt to find a definition something like this: "A Christian is someone who has been truly transformed by God and is trusting Jesus for his or her salvation."

This is a good and helpful—even profoundly biblical—definition. The Scriptures do call us to personal, heart-felt faith in Jesus Christ, to a whole-hearted commitment to the one who died on the cross and who was raised from the dead so that we could be reconciled to God. Furthermore, the Scriptures teach that in order to embrace Christ in this way we must be changed, that God must transform us. In the words of our Lord, we must be "born again," "born anew," "born from above." Henry Scougal was on good biblical authority when he described Christianity as "the life of God in the soul of man."

In other words, a fully developed definition of Christian must recognize that the Christian faith is profoundly *supernatural*, that it is deeply *experiential*.

This definition also serves a protective function. The church must recognize the danger of a purely nominal, superficial Christianity. In the parish I served as a pastoral intern twenty years ago, the clergy would often speak (with a mixture of derision and compassion) of the "holly-lilies," those people who attend church only when the building is decorated with holly (Christmas) or lilies (Easter). I've discovered that to be a common trait both in the South and here in the Northeast. We've all seen enough mob movies to hear of the Mafioso who is a devout churchgoer and yet still ruthlessly rubs out his enemies. Purely cultural Christianity, what many Protestants have called "dead orthodoxy," is a serious danger. A definition of Christian that preserves the supernatural and experiential aspects is a helpful protection against the shallowness and superficiality that so often characterize the religious life of our culture.

THE "CATHOLIC" DEFINITION

In more "catholic" circles (hardly limited to the Roman Catholic Church), one is likely to hear a definition more along these lines: "A Christian is someone who has been made a member of the body of Christ through Holy Baptism."

This too is a good, helpful, and profoundly biblical definition. To look no further, one sees evidence of this throughout the book of Acts. On the great day of Pentecost, the people respond to Saint Peter's sermon by asking what they must do. His response is clear: "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (2:38). According to the apostle, how does one receive forgiveness and the Spirit? By repenting and being baptized.

Later, as Saint Paul recalls his own conversion, he quotes the instructions given to him by Ananias of Damascus: "And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his [Jesus'] name" (22:16).

From the biblical perspective, baptism is not what one does immediately upon becoming a Christian; rather, it is basic to becoming a Christian in the first place. In one sense,

therefore, it might be better to refer to the so-called "nominal" or "cultural Christian" not so much as a *non-Christian* (as the more "evangelical" definition would have it) but as an *unfaithful Christian*.

In other words, a fully developed definition of Christian must recognize that the Christian faith is deeply *communal*, that it is profoundly *sacramental* and *ecclesial*. Saint Cyprian's famous quotation is right to the point: "No one can have God as his Father without having the church as his mother." John Calvin, who quoted Cyprian in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, writes similarly:

He who would find Christ, must first of all find the church. How would one know where Christ and his faith were, if one did not know where His believers are? And he who would know something of Christ, must not trust himself, or build his own bridges into heaven through his own reason, but he must go to the church, visit and ask of the same . . . for outside of the church is no truth, no Christ, no salvation.

Baptism, we must remember, is not the rite of entrance into some merely human association like the Garden Club or the AARP! In baptism we are made members, not of some social club, but of the people of God, the body of Christ, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. In baptism we are made parts of this *profoundly supernatural* entity. Of course, the whole church—evangelical, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox—agrees that baptism and church membership are no guarantees of final salvation. But we must also agree that the church is no mere human institution.

This definition also serves to protect the church, this time from an overly-individualistic form of Christianity, from the blatant sectarianism at the heart of a popular county song:

*I know a man who once was a sinner
I know a man that once was a drunk
I know a man, once was a loser
But he went out one day and made an altar out of a stump.*

*Me and Jesus got our own thing going
Me and Jesus got it all worked out
Me and Jesus got our own thing going
We don't need anybody to tell us what it's all about.*

So, as before, this definition of Christian serves a protective function. A definition of Christian that preserves the communal and sacramental aspects is a helpful protection against the rank individualism and sectarianism that also characterize the religious life of our culture.

AN EVANGELICAL AND CATHOLIC DEFINITION

If it were possible to give a one-word definition of Christian, that would be the one found in the passage already mentioned, Acts 11:26: "And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians" (ESV). A disciple is a follower; a Christian is a disciple of Christ, a follower of Christ. But after centuries of controversy, a one-word definition will no longer suffice. Here then is a longer definition of Christian:

A Christian is someone who, by the grace and mercy of the Father, has been set apart to be a follower of Jesus Christ in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

It's all there. Being a Christian is profoundly supernatural and experiential; the Christian life is (to use somewhat overused evangelical language) about having a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Those whose adherence to the church is purely cultural, those who are Christians in name only, those who lack a true faith in Christ, are not true followers of Christ.¹ Yet being a Christian is also profoundly communal and sacramental; the Christian life is about having a relationship with the people of God through baptism into Christ. Those who reject the sacrament of baptism, those who refuse to participate in the life of the church, the body of Christ, are not true followers of Christ.

I must stress that our relationship with God and our relationship with his people cannot finally be separated. In fact,

God's supernatural, experiential grace ordinarily comes to us through the ministry of the church, through the ministry of Word and sacrament. As I have often said to our parishioners: "If you don't have a right relationship with the people of God, you don't have a right relationship with God. If you don't have a right relationship with the body of Christ, you don't have a right relationship with Christ. If you don't have a right relationship with the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, you don't have a right relationship with the Holy Spirit."

Sadly, there are many in our world whose working definitions of Christian are far shallower than even our "evangelical" and "catholic" half-definitions. Many, like the young woman at the university, simply think of Christians as "nice people." And an increasing number would reject even that definition, seeing Christianity as a narrow religion of exclusion, oppression, and injustice.

Our task as disciples of Christ, in this and every age, is to live in such a way that our very lives reflect the life of the one we follow. Martin Luther was fond of saying that Christians are to be "little Christs." Our goal is for people to see in our lives—and in the life of our ecclesial communities—the love, joy, grace, and forgiveness that come from following the Savior. We want our friends to be able to point to us and say, "Now that is the definition of a Christian!"

Author

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Notes

1. I am leaving aside here the important question of the faith of young children. I do believe that baptism is rightly given to the infant children of believers, and that by virtue of their baptism they are to be considered *Christian* children. But very young children can have a level of trust that is appropriate to their age; even babies trust their mothers. However, those "of age" who have a purely superficial relation to the Christian faith are not following Christ and are therefore not Christians in the fullest sense.